

Polka Party Will Fade Into the Past

By Mary Kramer

If America's a melting pot, then Bob "Jaslu" Whitcomb is one of its sweetest sauces. Or at least one of the most digestible.

The German-English son of a Presbyteri-an minister, he attended the University of Notre Dame and went on to build a 30-year career by playing nothing but roll-out-the-barrel polkas.

Today, on WJPW-AM in Rockford, "Jaslu" Whitcomb will bow out of broadcasting to start another career as manager of the Sandy Pines recreation area.

His last weekend "polka party" can be heard from 1 to 4 p.m. today on WJPW (810 on the AM dial).

"I'm starting to get butterflies," Whitcomb confessed late last week. "I've had a lot of fun over the years."

The party won't really be over until Sunday, Nov. 9, when restaurateur Adrian Winters will throw a bash in his honor. Things get underway at 4:30 p.m. next Sunday at Adrian's Ramona Terrace, 5179 West River Road NE.

Although Whitcomb has jokingly been touted as a pheasant-under-glass affair, it most likely will be pretzels and beer, with, of course, live polka music.

Whitcomb's gregarious bass voice first boomed over WSBT-AM in South Bend in 1945. "I just walked in and said I wanted to be an announcer," Whitcomb recalls. "They said, 'Well, he doesn't lisp, so I guess he's okay.'"

But after a year or two on the air as the host of a popular teen-audience show ("Frank Sinatra was the rage then."), Whitcomb balked over being inundated with advertising copy to read over the air.



Press Photo by LEON BORUCKI

Bob "Jaslu" Whitcomb is heading for Sandy Pines.

After he made some wisecracks about his problem over the air, he says, he learned an important lesson. He was fired.

"I learned a lesson at an early age: You don't bite the hand that feeds you," Whitcomb rumbles now. "You can have some fun and sneak into a commercial, but the thing to remember is always insult a sponsor but never a product."

In 1948, he moved to Grand Rapids and joined the staff at WGRD-AM, a station that had only been on the air a few months. WGRD was the personality radio station of its day. Its stable of air personalities, names like "Cousin Ed," "Big Bud" and WOOD-AM's durable superstar, Bruce Grant.

As a morning disc jockey, Whitcomb one day slipped a polka into his music lineup. The listener response was so good, he added a few more. Before long, the "Jaslu" personality was born and Whitcomb was hosting a daily three-hour polka show.

That was the heyday of personality radio and Whitcomb had plenty to spare. If you were around Grand Rapids in the

'50s and early '60s, you might remember his off-beat stunts that would draw families out to see him.

Once, when hyping one of his loyal sponsors, Whitcomb urged his listeners: "Buy a lawn mower from Frank and Ray at Ball Park Hardware and I'll come over and mow your lawn."

One man took him up on the offer, and about 3,000 people turned out to watch Whitcomb give the lawn a manicure.

"It was fun!" Whitcomb booms. "Ves Ramsey was my second and he'd massage my legs after each trip across the lawn. Heck, it was only 20 feet! Then he'd fan me off between trips. I even had an escort to the place: two cops and a guy in a Model T."

"After it was over, we all went to a hall and everybody got bombed."

In 1961, a dozen of Whitcomb's sponsors on WGRD put on a 39th birthday bash at the Civic Auditorium. He even received a congratulatory telegram from Jack Benny, who personally celebrated his own 39th birthday.

In those days, Whitcomb sported a thinning head of hair and a more slender silhouette. The wavy, coal black hair is gone, the silhouette is of a more Hitchcockian dimension, but the sly humor is still there.

Whitcomb stayed with WGRD until its changed its format to a Top 40 in the early 1960s. Briefly, he was out of radio trying his hand at real estate sales and the party store business.

Then eight years ago, he accepted an offer to bring his polka party to Rockford. Broadcasting from WJPW, Whitcomb often pokes innocent fun at his boss, owner Jack Payne and the station, referring to the modest, almost primitive, studio as "Payne's Palace."

He has joked about the "palace" and its revolving rooftop dining room so often that it stunned him once when a couple from Middeville arrived to celebrate their anniversary in the restaurant they had heard so much about on Jaslu's show.

"Thank God, I wasn't there the day they came," Whitcomb sighs. "The guy who was on duty just said, 'Well, you know Jaslu. He jokes around a lot. Couldn't you tell he was joking?'"

Whitcomb still plans to maintain his West Side home after beginning his new duties this week at Sandy Pines in Allegan County.